



# what's up?

## sexual behavior

### INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

#### What's it all about?

Many adults believe teens should not have sexual intercourse, and this is frequently at odds with the social environment in which teens are growing up. Teens may get messages from TV, magazines, movies, and music that sex is romantic and exciting. But these media often do not show the consequences of sex, including pregnancy and STIs. Adults need to discuss the impact of sex on a teen's emotional development, family life and future goals.

#### Why does it matter?

- Early sexual activity is linked to a greater number of sex partners and increased risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Some teens may believe the myth that "everyone is having sex." In reality, about half of high school students have not had sex.
- Sexually experienced youth are much more likely to smoke, use drugs and alcohol, and participate in delinquent activities than youth who have not had sex.
- Teens are at risk for sexually transmitted infections. In 2002, more than 6,200 STIs were reported among young people in Washington 10 to 19 years old.
- Only a third of the parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds knew that their child has had sex.

#### What are the details?

- The likelihood of teens having intercourse increases steadily with age.
- Young female teens are at risk for unwanted or forced sexual intercourse. About 7 out of 10 women who first had intercourse before age 13 say it was unwanted or forced.
- About 80% of sexually experienced youth 12 to 14 years old, and over 50% of sexually experienced youth 15 to 19 years old wished they waited longer to have sex.
- Nearly two-thirds of sexually active 15- to 17-year-old girls have partners who are within 2 years of their age, and more than a quarter have sexual partners who are 3 to 5 years older. Most sexually active boys have female partners close to their age.
- Among 15- to 17-year-olds, about half are concerned that they might go farther sexually because they were drinking or using drugs.
- 1-in-5 sexually active adolescents and young adults 15 to 24 years old report having engaged in unprotected sex while intoxicated.



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#### What can I do?

Studies indicate that clear, strong messages from parents are critical. Yet many parents say that talking about sexuality with their teens is one of the hardest things they have faced. Here are some tips to get the ball rolling:

- Show you are accepting and understanding. Try to listen before giving advice. Let teens know they can trust you and come to you, even when they make mistakes.
- Talk to teens on an ongoing basis before problems arise. Start conversations early instead of waiting for questions.
- Share your values, beliefs and concerns with your children. They need to know where you stand.
- Before age 14, give teens accurate information about intercourse, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, body parts, feelings and relationships. They need information. Knowledge is not harmful.
- Talk to boys about girls' development and to girls about boys' development. They need to know about both male and female bodies, feelings and responsibilities.
- Encourage teens to express how they are feeling. Be ready to hear opinions you may not agree with.
- Inform teens about sexual abuse just like you would other dangers. This is a safety issue. Let them know that you think it is wrong for people to expect sex in return for attention, favors or compliments.
- Discourage early dating and dating older partners, both of which increase the chances of having sex.

#### Sexuality education . . . does it matter?

No single approach to talking with teens about sex is appropriate for all adolescents in all circumstances and in every community. It is clear, however, that certain things can make an impact.

All teens need sexuality education that teaches them refusal and negotiation skills and gives them up-to-date information about birth control and sexually transmitted infections before they are sexually active.

In a recent review of evaluated prevention programs, the Institute of Medicine found that “sexuality education programs that provide information on both abstinence and contraceptive use neither encourage the onset of sexual intercourse nor increase the frequency of intercourse among adolescents...programs that provide both messages appear effective in delaying the onset of sexual intercourse and encouraging contraceptive use once sexual activity has begun, especially among younger adolescents.”

**hot  
links!**

Kaiser Family Foundation [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)  
Go to “Adolescent Sexual Health”

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

Teen Health and the Media <http://depts.washington.edu/thmedia/>

American Psychological Association [www.apa.org/pi/pii/teen/contents.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/pii/teen/contents.html)  
Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/>

Kids Health [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)  
Age-appropriate information for kids, teens and parents

Washington State Department of Health  
DOH Pub 910-115 11/2003  
[www.doh.wa.gov](http://www.doh.wa.gov)

Resources listed here are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the State of Washington.

References for source materials are available from the Child and Adolescent Health program, 360-236-3547.

For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. Please call 1-800-525-0127.



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# P R I N T I N G   S P E C I F I C A T I O N S

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"Sexual Behavior" Fact Sheet**

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